

## Chapter 21

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### Atlanta

*"I have never believed Wayne Williams killed not only Yusef—I don't believe Wayne Williams killed anybody."*

—Camille Bell, the mother of victim Yusef Bell

*"I don't believe he did it any more than I'd go out there and shoot somebody myself."*

—Willie May Mathis, the mother  
of victim Jefferey Mathis

*"Wayne Williams ain't doing no time for killing my child. He ain't doing no time for killing nary a child."*

—Eunice Jones, the mother of victim Clifford Jones

As the cases of Marc Dutroux and many others have amply illustrated, there can be a very fine line between organized pedophilia and serial murder. Perhaps nowhere was that point more clearly made than in what was at the time America's murder capitol: Atlanta, Georgia, during the killings commonly referred to as the Atlanta Child Murders.

By this time, it should not come as any great surprise that the Atlanta killings did not follow the patterns suggested by serial killer 'profiles.' First of all, the victims of the 'child' murders were not all children; six of them were in their twenties, and there were many more in that age bracket who should have made the victims' list. "The List," as the official tally of victims was dubbed, was one of the more controversial aspects of the investigation, and one that needs to be addressed in order to put the remainder of this discussion in context.

A number of researchers have charged that The List was subject to constantly shifting parameters, which resulted in a number of victims whose cases appeared

to be connected being excluded from the official victim count. Chet Dettlinger—a former Public Safety Commissioner and assistant to the chief of the Atlanta Police Department, and the co-author of *The List*—maintains that sixty-three “pattern” victims were arbitrarily left off the official tally, more than twice as many as actually did make it. He also argues that twenty-five of those victims were killed *after* the arrest of Wayne Williams, the purported Atlanta child murderer. The county’s chief medical examiner at the time of the killings, Joseph Burton, has said much the same thing: “by no means did the deaths of young black children and young black men stop with the arrest and conviction of Wayne Williams.”

Among the names that were arbitrarily omitted were a number of adult victims. Before March 1981, nearly two years after the killings had begun, adults were not deemed to fit the ‘profile’ and were therefore excluded from The List. After the parameters were changed to allow the first adult victim to be included, five more victims in their twenties were added in rapid succession over the next eight weeks, but none of those killed in the prior twenty months who otherwise fit the pattern were retroactively added. Similarly, many female victims were excluded, even though two of the earliest list victims were young girls. A number of young boys were excluded as well, for reasons that appear to have been entirely arbitrary. There is a considerable amount of uncertainty, therefore, as to how many victims there actually were, and when the killings began and ended. This discussion will be limited to the twenty-nine officially recognized victims, though it is quite apparent that at least as many more were deliberately omitted from The List. As Public Safety Commissioner Dick Hand has acknowledged, “The list that was created by the Task Force, in my own personal opinion, was an artificial list.”

According to the artificial—but government sanctioned—list, the victims of the Atlanta ‘child’ murders ranged in age from seven-year-old LaTonya Wilson to twenty-eight-year-old John Porter. Males and females were both represented, though a large majority were male. All of the victims, significantly, were African-American. There was no consistent pattern to the killings, as medical examiner Burton acknowledged: “there was no signature that said this case and this case and this case are people that have been murdered or killed by the same individual.” The first victim, fourteen-year-old Ed Smith, was shot. All the rest were killed with weapons of opportunity. The most common cause of death was asphyxiation, with strangulation a close second. Two victims had their heads bludgeoned with blunt objects, two others were stabbed to death, another was drowned, and young Aaron Wyche broke his neck after being pushed or dropped from a bridge. One victim’s body was never recovered and several others were too badly decomposed by the time of their discovery to determine the cause of death.

There was no discernable pattern to the cases that were added to the list, beyond the fact that all the victims were young African-Americans who met with violent deaths. As *Los Angeles Times* reporter and *The List* co-author Jeff Prugh put it, "There was no pattern, per se, that I could really see, other than that they were all dead." But while there was no pattern connecting the manner of the abductions and killings, there were a number of troubling connections between the victims, most of whom lived in the same four 'inner city' neighborhoods. Those connections were consistently, and seemingly deliberately, ignored by the police.

The first two victims, young teens Ed Smith and Alfred Evans, were friends who spent a good deal of time together. They disappeared just four days apart, strongly suggesting that the victims were known to the killer(s) and were definitely not randomly selected. That would become all the more apparent as the body count mounted.

More than one witness reported seeing the fourth victim, Yussef Bell, getting into a car with his mother's former husband. The man was considered a suspect in the boy's disappearance for more than a year, but was ultimately cleared of any involvement. He would not be the only close friend or family member to become a prime suspect.

The body of the next victim, Angel Lenair, showed clear signs of sexual abuse, although that evidence was notably downplayed and deemed insignificant by authorities. As the story continued to unfold, however, it became increasingly apparent that sexual abuse of the child victims was indeed of considerable significance.

Like Yussef Bell, Jefferey Mathis was also last seen getting into a car, described as blue by witnesses. According to another witness, Jefferey was again in a blue car, and still very much alive, a couple days later. This was just the first of many bizarre episodes that suggested that at least some of the victims were not killed immediately, but were kept alive for an indeterminate period of time following their abductions. That were other indications as well that at least some of the victims were not killed right away: some of them were found wearing different clothing than what they had been wearing when they disappeared, and some had undigested food in their stomachs that was not consistent with the meals they were known to have eaten before their abductions.

Shortly after Jefferey's disappearance, other boys at his school reported men in a car attempting to lure them away from the school grounds. They described it as a blue car. While that certainly did not amount to a positive identification, it did represent a potential break in the case. The boys reported the incident, and even memorized the car's license plate number to give to police—who nevertheless declined to investigate the lead.

The next victim, Eric Middlebrooks, received a phone call at 10:30 on a Sunday night and, upon hanging up the phone, immediately grabbed his tools and raced out the door, claiming that he suddenly had to repair his bike. He was never seen alive again. The questions of who could have called the boy and what they could have said to him to lead him so eagerly to his death are ones that have never been answered.

The next victim who later became a name on the list added a rather peculiar twist to the case, yet again reminiscent of the notorious Lindbergh abduction. Seven-year-old LaTonya Wilson was allegedly kidnapped from her occupied home, but an eyewitness account of the abduction painted a scenario that could not possibly have occurred. Perhaps significantly, the disappearance occurred on June 22, the summer solstice. A friend of the young girl's family was initially considered a prime suspect in the abduction and murder—a reasonable suspicion considering the bizarre and implausible circumstances of her kidnapping. The targeting of the man by police, however, provoked outrage in Atlanta's black community, as had the police targeting of Camille Bell's former husband.

The death of the next victim, Aaron Wyche, was initially deemed accidental, until it became obvious that the official finding that the boy had 'fallen' was, to say the least, extremely unlikely. Anthony Carter reportedly disappeared while playing hide-and-seek outside his home around 1:00 AM, though one wonders who allows a nine-year-old to play hide-and-seek outside in the middle of the night. Some police investigators apparently pondered that very question, concluding that the story told by the boy's mother seemed rather unlikely. She was subsequently arrested, then released and thereafter tailed and questioned for several months, eventually leading her to move out of the area. Those actions by the police further enraged the citizens of Atlanta.

In mid-July 1980, an activist group formed by the parents of victims finally pressured the police into linking the killings and launching a serious investigation, or at least the appearance of one. The disappearances and murders had begun at least a year earlier and at least eleven lives had already been taken. Police reluctantly announced the formation of a special task force on July 17. Before the end of the month, another victim, Earl Terrell, disappeared. His aunt promptly received a call from an unidentified person who delivered the following cryptic message: "I've got Earl. Don't call the police." Shortly thereafter, she received a second call: "I've got Earl. He's in Alabama. It will cost you \$200 to get him back. I will call back on Friday."

There is no indication that Earl was in fact taken to Alabama. There is also no evidence that anyone is actually stupid enough to kidnap a child and transport him out of the state for the purpose of raising a couple hundred dollars in ransom money. Those bizarre phone calls though served a very important purpose: they

immediately made the case a federal matter. The task force was barely on its feet when the FBI rode into town to take over the investigation, with some 200 FBI agents descending on the city of Atlanta. Suddenly, everyone wanted to be involved in investigating what police had previously considered to be a batch of unrelated violent deaths. The nation's top 'big city' detectives were flown into town and hailed as 'supercops' come to save the day. The FBI sent in 'profilers' in what was billed as the first real test of the 'science' of profiling. The Bureau's self-styled experts predicted, not surprisingly, that a black serial killer was responsible for the murders.

Before the investigation was wrapped up, no less an authority than Vice-President George Bush even came to town, ostensibly to coordinate federal and local efforts and to make sure the investigation stayed on track. Citizens, meanwhile, began organizing themselves into 'bat patrols'—vigilante groups who patrolled the streets of their neighborhoods wielding baseball bats. The police quickly saw fit to break these groups up.

In the ensuing months, community leaders organized search teams, eventually numbering thousands of volunteers. Often working alongside these mostly African-American search teams were groups of unidentified white 'volunteers,' attired in flak jackets and carrying rifles, walkie-talkies, and various other pieces of paramilitary equipment. No explanation has been offered for the presence of these curiously equipped men.

In addition to federalizing the investigation, Earl Terrell's disappearance was significant for another reason: it exposed the dark underbelly of the Atlanta killings. Earl disappeared after leaving a public swimming pool that was directly across from a house that was known to be the hub of a child pornography ring. The owner of the house, John David Wilcoxon, was ultimately convicted for his complicity in the ring. He was never, however, seriously considered as a suspect in Terrell's disappearance, despite a witness placing Earl at Wilcoxon's house on several occasions, and despite the fact that literally thousands of child pornography photos were seized from Wilcoxon's home.

The next victim, Clifford Jones, was found dead alongside a dumpster behind a laundromat in late August 1980. No fewer than three young witnesses reported seeing the laundromat manager, James Brooks, go into the backroom accompanied by a black male youth. One of them even saw the boy beaten, anally raped and strangled to death by Brooks and another man, Calvin Smith. Other witnesses saw Brooks, wearing a hooded ceremonial robe, carry a large object out to the trash where the body was later discovered. Brooks candidly admitted to police that the boy had been in the laundromat around the time of his death, but he steadfastly denied any involvement in the murder. Notably though, he failed two polygraph examinations. The police nevertheless cleared him as a suspect, claiming

that the eyewitness to the killing was “retarded.” They did not bother to explain all the other witness accounts or the failed polygraphs.

At around the time of Jones’ death, the task force finally began to assemble the infamous ‘list.’ Darron Glass was the next name added to it. Shortly after his disappearance, his mother received an emergency breakthrough call from someone claiming to be her son, but when she picked up the line to speak to him, it had gone dead. Around that same time, an explosion at a daycare center in one of Atlanta’s black neighborhoods took the lives of four more kids. Investigators quickly concluded that the explosion was accidental—the result of a boiler malfunction. Many in the neighborhood though, and in other neighborhoods where children were under siege, remained unconvinced.

Charles Stephens was the next victim to disappear. When his remains were discovered shortly thereafter, the crime scene was quickly contaminated by an officer who opted to toss a blanket over the body (the contamination of crime scenes was, alas, a fairly common occurrence throughout the investigation). Shortly after Charles’ disappearance, a drug dealer and police informant told investigators that he had seen the body of a black youth in the backseat of a customer’s car. He also reported that he knew the man to be a pedophile who had on occasion offered him cash to procure young male prostitutes. Needless to say, this lead was not followed up on by police.

Next to disappear was Aaron Jackson, a friend of both earlier victim Aaron Wyche and future victim Patrick Rogers, who disappeared just nine days later. Rogers was the oldest victim to date at fifteen. He was connected to at least a dozen other victims on and off ‘The List.’

Lubie Geter disappeared next. Like Earl Terrell, Geter was connected to child pornographer Wilcoxon, as well as to another adult pedophile who was later connected to William Barrett, one of the last names to be put on the list. Three weeks after Geter’s disappearance, his friend Terry Pue disappeared as well. Pue’s body yielded some of the best forensic evidence of any of the killings: fingerprints. The prints were not left by Wayne Williams, a fact that neither side would mention at trial.

The next victim, Patrick Baltazar, called the task force shortly before his disappearance and expressed fear for his life. His teacher received a call not long after he vanished from a loudly sobbing boy who did not identify himself, though the teacher suspected that the boy was Patrick. The next addition to the list was Curtis Walker. An uncle with whom Walker lived was murdered as well, but he did not make the list. Next was Joseph Bell, who knew several other victims on the list. Shortly after he was reported missing, a co-worker reported receiving a call from the boy during which Joseph begged for help and stated that he was “almost dead.” Days later, Bell’s mother received a call from a woman who

claimed to be holding the boy. The woman called again later and managed to talk to Bell's two siblings. The mother reported both calls to the task force, but never got a call back.

Ten days after Bell's disappearance, his friend Timothy Hill disappeared as well. Hill was later connected to earlier victims Alfred Evans, Jefferey Mathis, Patrick Baltazar, and Anthony Carter. Hill was known to frequent a home owned by a known pedophile named Thomas Terrell. At least two witnesses, one a neighbor of Terrell, placed Hill at the house around the time of his disappearance. Terrell admitted to police that he knew the boy and had previously engaged in sexual acts with him. Although what he admitted to was a crime, he was not arrested nor was he ever seriously considered as a suspect.

Larry Rogers and Eddie Duncan, who was connected to earlier victim Patrick Rogers, were the first adults to make the list. They were followed by Michael McIntosh, who knew both Joseph Bell and final victim Nathaniel Cater. McIntosh had been seen on numerous occasions at Thomas Terrell's house. John Porter disappeared next, though he was not put on the list until much later, as part of an effort to build a dubious fiber evidence case against Williams. Jimmy Payne was next on the list, followed by William Barrett. Barrett was connected to the same unidentified white male pedophile who was connected to earlier victim Lubie Geter. Police records later revealed that Barrett had reported being in fear for his life after receiving threats from someone he described as a "hit man."

The final victim to make the list was Nathaniel Cater, an admitted drug dealer and homosexual prostitute. The discovery of Cater's body on May 24, 1981 provided the first 'evidence' throughout the two-year killing spree that allegedly linked Williams to the crimes: he had been observed on a bridge two days earlier at the time a splash allegedly occurred in the river below. Two days later, Cater's body was discovered downstream from the bridge, which purportedly pointed to Williams' guilt. Some investigators do not believe, however, that Williams ever stopped his car on that bridge or that there was a splash that night. It has been noted that the officer filing the report did not immediately report the splash, nor attempt to verify the source of the alleged splash, nor request equipment to drag the river and recover the alleged object. It is certainly possible that the entire incident was fabricated to tenuously link Wayne Williams to the murders.

Significantly, the medical examiner was initially unable to ascertain the time of Cater's death, but he later accommodated police by placing it in accordance with the bridge story. No fewer than four eyewitnesses, however, came forward to report that they had seen Cater very much alive *the day after* the alleged bridge incident. That crucial exculpatory evidence was never introduced at trial. Williams' attorneys later claimed that they were never informed of the existence

of the witnesses, but that claim is rather dubious considering their overall performance at trial.

Williams was not immediately arrested following the infamous bridge incident, but he was publicly identified as the new prime suspect, thus beginning a two-and-a-half-week press circus at the Williams' family home and a trial by media that found Wayne guilty long before he ever set foot in a courtroom. This occurred despite the fact that there was a noticeable lack of evidence tying Williams to *any* of the murders. The local district attorney was keenly aware of that fact and was therefore not too eager to have Williams arrested. The FBI, however, along with federal and state officials, had no problem with pinning all of the murders on Williams. Local authorities were duly pressured into making the arrest. Completely ignored was the rather obvious fact that the suspect did not bear even a passing resemblance to any of the witness descriptions on file with the task force or to any of the composite sketches that had been created.

Though publicly branded the 'Atlanta Child Murderer,' Wayne Williams was indicted and he faced trial for the murders of two adults: Nathaniel Cater and Jimmy Payne. He was never indicted for the murders of any of the children that were slain. Evidence of their murders was allowed into court, however. Despite the fact that there was never enough evidence to build a case against Williams for the crimes, the trial judge allowed testimony about ten other killings. As outraged Georgia Supreme Court Justice George Smith later noted, Williams assumed an "unenviable position as a defendant who, charged with two murders, was forced to defend himself as to 12 separate killings."

Besides that inflammatory testimony, which would have been disallowed in any legitimate courtroom, the state's case was built almost entirely on highly suspect fiber evidence. That evidence, purportedly the strongest element of the prosecution's presentation, had seemingly been planted to provide the state with some semblance of a case. It was claimed, for example, that fibers from Williams' car were found on one victim who had disappeared *before* Williams had even purchased the car. It was also claimed that Clifford Jones' body yielded fibers linking him to Williams, though all the other available evidence indicated that Jones had in fact been killed at a laundromat by James Brooks.

Another rather curious fact about the trial is that one of the two men whom Williams was formally accused of killing, Jimmy Ray Payne, was not even initially considered a murder victim. The cause of death listed on his original death certificate was 'undetermined.' Recognizing, however, that a homicide prosecution requires an actual homicide victim, the state later had the death certificate altered.

The legitimacy of Williams' defense attorneys was suspect before the trial even began on January 6, 1982. Despite the amazingly high profile of the case and the wholesale vilification of Williams by the local media, no request was made for a



change of venue—an incomprehensible oversight for anyone truly motivated to protect the rights of the accused. Despite the best efforts of the state to railroad Williams with a largely fraudulent circumstantial case, he likely would have been acquitted if his defense team had not made another crucial ‘error’ by sending Wayne to the stand in his own defense. Williams performed well on the stand for the first two days, until his attorneys compounded their ‘error’ by urging their client to be combative. Jurors later described Williams as “his own worst enemy” for the performance that followed.

On February 27, the promising young man who had once been installed as student council president by Andrew Young was found guilty of two counts of first-degree murder. He received two consecutive life sentences, as punishment for crimes that he clearly did not commit. There is reason to believe, however, that Williams *was* involved in the pedophile operations that formed the backdrop for the murders.

By profession, Wayne Williams was a freelance photographer and a self-styled ‘music promoter’ who spent much of his free time trolling for ‘talent’ among Atlanta’s black youth. He was also known to impersonate a police officer, a talent that had once gotten him arrested at the age of eighteen. According to reports that author/investigator Chet Dettlinger received from neighbors, Wayne and his father responded to the alleged bridge incident by performing “a major cleanup job around their house. They carried out boxes and carted them off in the station wagon. They burned negatives and photographic prints in the outdoor grill.” It does not require a great deal of imagination to figure out what sort of photographs it was that Williams had been taking.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that Williams was responsible for the deaths of Nathaniel Cater or Jimmy Payne, let alone the other twenty-one victims whose murders were declared solved following his conviction. Even before the trial began, there were clear indications that the state considered all the killings solved. “Emergency Hot Line” posters had been taken down from phone booths, buses and schools; “Reward” signs had also been taken down, and extra police patrols had been withdrawn. The task force had been pared down to just six remaining members, and most of the media circus had left town.

None of the pedophiles connected to the case were ever seriously considered as suspects, and certainly none were ever charged with any of the murders. There is little doubt though that many of the victims were involved in a large and well-protected child prostitution and child pornography ring. Unanswered though are the questions of why, and by whom, they were killed.

Many have theorized that the Ku Klux Klan, as well as the CIA and the FBI, were involved in the killings. FBI documents purportedly reveal that a Klansman named Charles Sanders confessed to involvement in many of the killings as a way

to incite a race war. While inflaming racial tensions may well have been *a* goal of the killings, however, it seems unlikely that that was the primary motivation. Another motive was identified by a witness named Shirley McGill, whose story was made public by Roy Innis, head of the Congress of Racial Equality, which had assisted in an independent investigation into the murders. McGill, a Miami cocktail waitress, claimed that the murders were perpetrated by a cult involved in drug trafficking, child pornography, and Satanism.

The cult, she said, was composed of members in both Georgia and Florida. One of the leaders was her part-time lover, Vietnam veteran Parnell Traham. She claimed that she had witnessed both animal and human sacrifices and she spoke of “business murders” that the cult had committed. Wayne Williams was identified as a member of the cult whom she had seen filming rituals, but not directly participating in the ritual homicides. McGill claimed to be a bookkeeper for the cult’s drug trafficking operations, which involved purchasing used cars in Miami, packing them with drugs, and then delivering them to Atlanta and Houston. She also said that the ring had police protection and that at least one funeral home was complicit in disposing of bodies.

CORE’s Innis delivered this story to the press in April 1981 and he was, not surprisingly, greeted with skepticism and derision. With its witness under attack, CORE commissioned a battery of tests to gauge her veracity. McGill passed two polygraph examinations, repeated her story under hypnosis, and was declared sane by examining psychiatrists. She was also able to lead investigators to remote sites that had clearly been used for the performance of rituals.

A few months before CORE’s attempt to publicize McGill’s story, police had received an anonymous call that led them to an abandoned home in southwest Atlanta. Neighbors that were questioned reported strange comings and goings at odd hours. Investigators reported being sickened by an odor “like decaying flesh,” though no bodies were found. Detectives did find children’s clothing, along with an ax, a hatchet, and two bibles nailed to the wall—both open to passages on human sacrifice. Professor Carl Raschke has written that, in the neighborhoods where the killings occurred, “a number of children have told police about satanic sex abuse in which, they insist, they were compelled to drink both animal and human blood.” Some months after McGill came forward, searchers stumbled upon a ritual site littered with the carcasses of slaughtered animals. Prominent features of the site included a stone altar stained with blood and a twelve-foot-high charred cross.

It is not inconceivable that the killings were performed as human sacrifices. Some reports hold that several of the parents reported to independent investigators that the bodies of their children had crosses carved into their foreheads and

chests. It is also not inconceivable that the ritual killings were recorded as snuff films.

There is another, even darker, scenario that merits brief mention here, even if it is almost entirely speculative. Atlanta is home to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), a prime suspect among conspiracy researchers as the origin of the AIDS virus. The Atlanta child killings began, strangely enough, just as the first cases of AIDS, yet to be identified, began surfacing in a few of America's big cities. There is a possibility that some of the young victims, known to be involved in sexual activities with both adult pedophiles and other children, were deliberately infected with the virus to track the progress of the disease and determine its communicability through sexual contact.

Several of the unindicted pedophile suspects died from the disease in the years following the murders, including James Brooks in 1987, and some of the most suppressed details of the case hint at some type of medical testing of some of the victims. A law enforcement memo that surfaced during the investigation, for example, described the castration of some victims, and a mortician's assistant reported finding the presence of syringe marks in the genitals of many of the victims. Were these children used as human guinea pigs for the most far-reaching biological warfare project ever conceived by man? If so, then they would certainly have had to be eliminated after serving their purpose. After all, it would have been difficult to explain a number of black children dropping dead from an 'emerging' virus thought at the time to be affecting only white gay males.

It could be that the young victims were doomed even had they not met with violent deaths. And it could be that their deaths were just the opening salvo of a 'final solution' that is now quietly killing millions.

*"I happen to believe that the numbers [of child prostitutes] are far greater than we can imagine...I don't have a doubt in my mind that were we to adequately police this problem that we would find that it is far more pervasive than any of us ever have imagined."*

—Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell, commenting on the prevalence of child exploitation in his city, *NPR News Morning Edition*, May 9, 2001